

How does God love us?

https://youtu.be/k6B_jYtivME?list=RDk6B_jYtivME (5:27)ⁱ

That's an old hymn (i.e., *The Love of God*)...sung by Christians now for over 102 years.

Composed by Frederick M. Lehman in 1917. But the words, the lyrics, came from centuries before.

Two hundred years earlier, an inmate in a prison for the mentally unstable died, alone. When those charged with cleaning and repainting his cell entered the space, they found these words scrawled on the wall:

Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade.

To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretch from sky to sky.

Lehman later explained, "Before their paint brushes had obliterated them, one of the men jotted them down and thus they were preserved."

But honestly, where could such a troubled, discarded person get these thoughts about the immeasurable love of God? More research was done, until a source entitled *The Book of Jewish Thought* contained a poem written in A.D. 1050, by Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai, to be recited and sung at the Feast of Pentecost.ⁱⁱ "We can imagine," Ben Glanzer mused,

this poet standing on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, contemplating the great love of his Jehovah. His heart is moved by the fires of inspiration. As the love of God sweeps over Nehorai's soul, his imagination fills the ocean with ink, the arching skies seem to magnify the scope of this all-compelling love, and the papyrus marsh comes to life with countless scribes writing ceaselessly and tirelessly about the measureless love of God.

This morning, we ask one important question...to prepare us for talking with someone about the gospel, God's good news.

What should you and I, as God's children, as Jesus' disciples, be prepared to share about God's love?

The Scriptures are crystal clear –

#1 God loves us first

1 John 4:18-19

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

Whenever Pamela and I have the chance to go out for the evening with a new couple, I almost always like to ask them two questions. Number one – “How did God bring you two together?” and Number two – “Was it love at first sight, or did one of you know before the other one?” Many times, we hear this answer to the 2nd question, from the wife. “Oh, at first, I didn’t really like him at all. He had to *win me over*.”

I get that. We male-types can be kinda “klutzy” at the front end. But I like that scenario. I like a young man to say, “I’m not giving up. I see something special in her. I will do what I need to do to love her way before she ever loves me. I will prove to her that she doesn’t need to be afraid of my love, or to love me back.

That’s what John is saying about God’s love. **He loved us *before* we ever started loving him. Now, we love Him...*because* He first loved us.**

I don’t know about you, but my life is so much better than it ever could have been because there were people in my life who loved me before I loved them.

- My mother **Mary Ellen**, and my father **Don**, my grandparents **Carl and Amelia**...loved me way before I ever loved them
- Sunday School teachers **Les Yunk**, **Richard Bliss**, and **Lowell Vandervort** loved me way before I ever loved them
- A fifth grade teacher named **Louis Bjorn** taught me and showed me a basketball and loved me way before I ever loved him
- A middle school English teacher named **Mrs. Anderson**, a middle-school science teacher named **John Tomscheck**
- A high school coach named **Jerry Verwey**
- A youth pastor named **Greg Waybright**
- A sociology prof named **Kenneth Taylor**. A seminary prof named Howard Hendricks
- A pastor mentor and wife named **Bob and Clarice Salstrom**
- A **church** which for decades gathered on **24th Street**...full of people who loved me before I ever loved them.
- The list that both Pamela and I could compose goes on and on and on...

All of them...hundreds of them...all conduits of what the Apostle John is talking about. God’s love... which doesn’t sit back but takes the lead.

Way before we ever love God, He pours his love into our lives.

#2 God loves us surprisingly

Romans 5:5-11

⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. ⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time **Christ died for** the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners, Christ died for** us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if **while we were enemies** we were reconciled to God by **the death of his Son**, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Good Bible study notices what is repeated. Notice the two word phrase repeated twice. "While we were..." (vs.6, vs. 8, vs. 10). God shows His love for us

- (vs.6) While we were still **weak** (surprising love because being *ungodly* means we have no capacity to become on our own what God's holiness demands).
- (vs.8) While we were still **sinners** (surprising love, because being *sinners* means
- (vs.10) While we were **enemies** (surprising love, because being *enemies*

Love compelled God the Father to direct God the Son into human flesh, onto a brutal cross, and into the jaws of condemnation and death...for the ungodly, for the sinners, for His enemies.

This should take our breath away for just this reason. The most grief I ever see is when someone whom someone else **really** loves dies, that someone else is stunned by the loss of life. That someone else is broken by the loss of someone. That someone else grieves day after day after day by the loss of someone. Let's never underestimate how MUCH God the Father loves and loved God the Son. Let's never underestimate how DIFFICULT it was for God the Father to put His Own Son in the hands of sinful, brutal, hypocritical, self-serving, self-serving, merciless political and religious power brokers. God the Father threw His own Son into a pack of ruthless wolves for us who were nothing more than weak and ungodly, eagerly disobedient sinners, dug-in enemies.

God loved us first. God loved us surprisingly!

Karl Barth, the brilliant 20th century theologian, was once asked to summarize in a few words all that he had written in the field of theology. This was his surprising summary: *Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.*

#3 God loves us lavishly

Ephesians 2:1-7

¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴**But God**, being rich in mercy, **because of the great love with which he loved us**, ⁵even when we were

dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This passage, if it teaches anything about God's love, celebrates God's determination to change my personal condition. Spiritually dead, all we could do was simply float along in the wrong-direction river of this world. Satan directing my life. My flesh-driven passions trapping me in destructive habits. Deserving nothing but God's wrath against sin.

But God – rich in mercy and great in love – was determined to change the game. Making me alive because He loves to show grace. Raising me out of my grave. Seating me with Christ in heavenly places. Eager to demonstrate throughout all eternity how much He loves me.

#4 God loves us relentlessly

Luke 15

¹¹ And Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

There are so many things to learn about God from this incredible parable. Here just one of them: **What do you think this son came to believe about his Father's love than he had not understood before?** In his classic book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer offers us this:

What matters supremely, therefore, is not in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact that He knows me.

- ✓ *I am graven on the palms of His hands.*
- ✓ *I am never out of his mind.*
- ✓ *All of my knowledge of Him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me.*
- ✓ *I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me.*

He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment therefore, when His care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort...in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good.

There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love us utterly realistic; based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion Him about me, in a way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench His determination to bless me.

Little 4 year old Jonathan was trying to learn the Lord's prayer. Every Sunday, he learned by listening at church. One Sunday, at home, his family decided to pray it together, before their noon meal. Over all the others, Jonathan's voice could be heard. *"Our Father, who art in heaven. I know you know my name."*

No one but no one loves each one of us first, surprisingly, lavishly, and relentlessly as God.

No one.

EMBRACING GOD'S LOVE

Nard Pugyao, from a tribe in the northern jungles of the Philippine island of Luzon, tells this story:

When I was about age six, a tall, pale whit man stumbled into my home village of Dibagat. The man didn't speak my language, so our elders asked him the very best they knew how, "Why are you here?"

"I've come to learn your language," he said. "I'd like to write it down and then give you God's Word in your language." We started teaching this man, Dick Roe, our language. Maybe his God could free us from the spirits.

When I was about thirteen, Dick had to return to the United States to raise support for his ministry. Before he left, he translated the gospel of Mark and gave me a copy. Sitting on top of a rock, I read the Gospel of Mark in my heart language. It felt like I was actually there, seeing the characters.

The further I read the more distressed I felt. A mob of people came to get Jesus out of the garden of Gethsemane. What did he do wrong? They accused him of all kinds of false things. They mocked him, spat on him, beat him, and took him before Pilate. Then came the scourge and the crown of thorns. It was excruciating to read that they forced him to carry a wooden cross and then nailed him to it.

Deep in my heart, a hatred of God swelled. I shook my fist and shouted, "I hate you, God, for being so powerless! Why should I believe in a powerless God like you?" I threw the Gospel of Mark down to the rocks and started walking home. I couldn't understand why God wouldn't protect his own Son. Our headhunters defended us to the death. Because of them, no one could touch us. I wanted a god like that, someone who would protect me from the spirits that demanded we sacrifice our cows, chickens, pigs, and dogs. This God didn't even save his own Son.

Suddenly God reached down into my heart. "Nard, don't you understand?" I heard him say. "That's how much I love you. I gave my Son on your behalf." For the first time, I understood grace. I understood how much God loved me.

"God, if you love me that much," I prayed, "I want to give you my life, my heart. It's all yours." I went back and began to further read in Mark. I read that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day.

Nobody in all of Dibagat, nobody from the Isnag people, had ever risen from the grave. The resurrection story changed my life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Share the gospel. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you start a conversation with someone during this Easter month about God’s initiating, surprising, lavish, relentless love for him, for her.

And if you desire, this morning, to step into God’s family by faith – to believe in Jesus and begin growing in Him, pray something like what Nard prayed.

*“God, if you love me that much,
I want to give you my life, my heart.
I believe Jesus your Son died for me.
I believe you raised Him powerfully from the dead.
I give you me. All of me is yours.”*

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ⁱ Bill Gaither Hymn sing on Vevo

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1950/09/the-story-of-the-love-of-god>

ⁱⁱⁱ Nard Pugyao, “Penetrating Power,” *Decisoin* (July – August 2006).